



BACKGROUND

From a base in Cuba, conquistadors enriched themselves and the Spanish crown by conquering the Aztec empire. Their success prompted Spain to seek wealth elsewhere in the Americas. In 1527, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was second in command of a massive expedition to Florida that included five ships and 600 men. The effort ended disastrously. Two ships sank in a hurricane, and a third of the men perished or deserted. After reaching Florida in the spring of 1528, the party of about 300 men marched overland and raided the Native American settlements they encountered. **Andrés Reséndez's** historical account begins at this point.

A DESPERATE TREK ACROSS AMERICA

Article by Andrés Reséndez



SETTING A PURPOSE

As you read, pay attention to the details that convey the explorers' situation and the efforts they undertook to save themselves.

Florida panhandle, Fall 1528

- 1 The 250 starving Spanish adventurers dubbed the shallow estuary near their campsite the "Bay of Horses," because every third day they killed yet another draft animal, roasted it, and consumed the flesh. Fifty men had already died of disease, injury, and starvation. What was worse, after having walked the length of Florida without finding gold, those still alive had lost contact with their ships. They were stranded in an alien continent.
- 2 "We were in such **straits** that anything that had some semblance of a solution seemed good to us," wrote Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, the **expedition's** royal treasurer, in one of the most harrowing¹ survival stories ever told. "I refrain here from telling this at greater length because each one can imagine for himself what could happen in a land so strange."

¹ **harrowing:** referring to an experience that is extremely distressing.

Notice & Note

Use the side margins to notice and note signposts in the text.

straits

(strāts) *adj.* a position of difficulty, distress, or extreme need.

expedition

(ĕk'spī-dīsh'ən) *n.* a journey, especially a difficult or hazardous one, undertaken after extensive planning and with a definite objective in mind.



conquistador

(kɒŋ-kē'stə-dôr, kɒn-kwɪs'tə-dôr) *n.* a 16th-century Spanish soldier-explorer who took part in the defeat of the Indian civilizations of Mexico, Central America, or Peru.

interminable

(ɪn-tūr'mə-nə-bəl) *adj.* seemingly endless.

ANALYZE AND EVALUATE EVIDENCE

Annotate: Mark the words and phrases in paragraph 6 that come from a primary source.

Infer: What does the information that is included add to your understanding of the explorers' situation?

3 Indeed, Cabeza de Vaca and the other leaders of the ill-fated venture had agreed to a desperate gamble: to trade their most effective weapons against the Indians—horses and firearms—for five makeshift vessels that might or might not be capable of carrying them to safety. Eating the horses gave them time to build the rafts. To make nails and saws, they threw their crossbows,² along with stirrups and spurs, into an improvised forge.

4 Like past **conquistadors**, Cabeza de Vaca and his men had relied on their breastplates,³ horses, and lethal weapons to keep the Indians at bay. Such overwhelming technological advantages meant they often did not even bother to negotiate, instead simply imposing their will. By sacrificing the very tools of their supremacy, they would now have to face the New World fully exposed to its perils and hold on only by their wits.

5 The expedition had unraveled with frightening speed. Just months earlier, the hopeful adventurers had embarked from Cuba in four ships and a brigantine⁴ and made landfall near present day Tampa Bay, intending to take possession of Florida in the name of His Most Catholic Majesty.⁵ Caught up in the excitement and rush to explore, the commander rashly divided the expedition, ordering the captains to take their ships on an exploration of the coast, while the men and the horses were put ashore. They agreed to meet just a few miles north of the debarkation point. But the **interminable** and confusing coast of Florida prevented the two parties from making contact.

6 With their jury-rigged⁶ saws they cut down trees, dragged them to the beach, lashed them together with the tails and manes of their dead horses, and fashioned sails from their tattered shirts. After five or six weeks, they slaughtered their last horse, then dragged the 15-ton rafts into the water. Fifty men crowded aboard each craft, the fifth commanded by Cabeza de Vaca. "And so greatly can necessity prevail," he observed, "that it made us risk going in this manner and placing ourselves in a sea so treacherous, and without any one of us who went having any knowledge of the art of navigation." The rafts floated only a few inches above the waterline; the waves would wash over the men as they traveled.

7 Little did the men on the rafts know that they were embarking on an eight-year adventure that would ultimately take their few survivors across the entire continent. After several weeks, storms separated

² **crossbows:** weapons made by fixing a bow crosswise on a wooden base and including grooves on that base to guide the flight of the arrow.

³ **breastplates:** pieces of armor covering the chest.

⁴ **brigantine:** a two-masted sailing ship with square sails on the forward mast and a large mainsail positioned from the front to the back of the ship.

⁵ **His Most Catholic Majesty:** honorary title of the king of Spain granted by Pope Alexander VI in 1494.

⁶ **jury-rigged:** assembled for temporary use in an improvised way.



the **flotilla**. Tormented by extreme hunger and drenched by the splashing of the waves, they were on the brink of death. “The people began to faint in such a manner that when the sun set,” Cabeza de Vaca would recall, “all those who came in my raft were fallen on top of one another in it, so close to death that few were conscious.” Only the helmsman and Cabeza de Vaca took turns steering the raft: “Two hours into the night, the helmsman told me that I should take charge of the raft, because he was in such condition that he thought he would die that very night.” Near dawn, Cabeza de Vaca heard the surf, and later that day they landed.

8 While most of the men survived the harrowing month long passage across the Gulf, eventually washing up on the coast of what is now Texas, many more perished of exposure and hunger that winter, some even resorting to cannibalism. Fewer still withstood enslavement at the hands of the natives in the vicinity of Galveston Bay. Ultimately, only four—Cabeza de Vaca, two other Spaniards in commanding positions, and an African slave named Estebanico—would escape their Indian masters after six years of toil. As slaves, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were forced to cope with native North America on its own terms, bridging two worlds that had remained apart for 12,000 years or more. They lived by their wits, coming to terms with half a dozen native languages and making sense of societies that other Europeans could not even begin to fathom.

9 Incredibly, the four castaways used this knowledge to refashion themselves into medicine men. As Cabeza de Vaca would explain it: “we made the sign of the cross over them and blew on them and recited a *Pater Noster*⁷ and an *Ave Maria*;⁸ and then we prayed as best we could to God Our Lord to give them health and inspire them to give us good treatment.” In one instance he revived a man who appeared to be dead. At the Indians’ insistence, all four survivors performed curing ceremonies. And thus many natives came to believe that these four strange-looking beings were able to manipulate the power of nature.

10 This real or imagined gifts of healing enabled the four survivors to move **unimpeded**, their reputation preceding them wherever they went. Nor were their actions a mere charade to win food and respect. They believed that their curative abilities went somehow much deeper: they came to see their incredible suffering odyssey as a test to which God had subjected them before revealing the true purpose of their existence. They viewed their sufferings as mortifications of the flesh, their beatings and extreme hunger akin to those of **flagellants**⁹

⁷ **Pater Noster**: a Latin phrase meaning “Our Father” that refers to the Lord’s Prayer.

⁸ **Ave Maria**: a Latin phrase meaning “Hail Mary” that refers to a Roman Catholic prayer.

⁹ **flagellants**: members of a Christian religious sect who publicly beat themselves with whips as an act of religious devotion and discipline.

flotilla

(flō-tīl’ə) *n.* a fleet of small water craft.

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

Annotate: Mark the infinitive phrase in the last sentence of paragraph 8.

Analyze: How does this phrase suggest that the explorers are exceptional? Explain.

unimpeded

(ən-im-pē’-dəd) *adj.* not delayed or obstructed in its progress.



NOTICE & NOTE



QUOTED WORDS

Notice & Note: Mark details in paragraph 11 that tell what Cabeza de Vaca does to survive the cold night.

Infer: What does the quotation tell you about Cabeza de Vaca?

posse

(pŏs'ē) *n.* a group of civilians temporarily authorized by officials to assist in pursuing fugitives.

- who inflicted torment upon themselves or of monks who fasted nigh unto death.
- 11 Once, alone and unable to find his party's camp, Cabeza de Vaca wandered in the woods naked in dread of the approaching chill of night. "But it pleased God that I found a tree aflame, and warmed by its fire I endured the cold that night." For five days he nursed that fire, before finally finding his companions.
- 12 The four wanderers were no longer mere castaways; they had become explorers once again. Yet theirs was a most peculiar expedition. Four naked and unarmed outsiders were led by hundreds, even thousands, of Indians. They were fed, protected, and passed off as though prized possessions from one indigenous group to the next. They became the first outsiders to behold what would become the American Southwest and northern Mexico, the first non-natives to describe this enormous land and its peoples.
- 13 By the time the four reemerged from the continental interior and reached the Pacific Coast, they had been so utterly transformed by the experience that fellow Europeans could hardly recognize them. A **posse** of Spanish slavers¹⁰ operating in what is now northwestern Mexico spotted potential prey: 13 Indians walking barefoot and clad in skins. On closer inspection, some of the details did not seem quite right. One was a black man. Could he be an Indian or an African emerging from the heart of the continent? Another member of the party appeared to be a haggard white man with hair hanging down to his waist and a beard reaching to his chest.
- 14 When Cabeza de Vaca addressed them in perfect Spanish, the slavers were "so astonished," he wrote, "that they neither talked to me nor managed to ask me anything," but bent themselves on rounding up the Indian escort. But Cabeza de Vaca and his companions would not allow it. No longer did the castaways view their companions as mere chattels,¹¹ the rightful prize of Christian conquest.
- 15 Perhaps no one understood their transformation more than the Indians themselves, who were unable to believe that Cabeza de Vaca

¹⁰**slaver:** one who catches people to enslave them.

¹¹**chattels:** enslaved persons.



and his three companions belonged to the same race as the slavers. The Indians had observed, he later wrote, that “we cured the sick, and they [the Spanish slavers] killed those who were well; that we came naked and barefoot, and they went about dressed and on horses and with lances; and that we did not covet anything but rather, everything they gave us we later returned and remained with nothing, and that the others had no other objective but to steal everything they found and did not give anything to anyone.”

16 Cabeza de Vaca went back to Spain, attached himself to the court of Charles V, and was able to present his ideas of a humane colonization of the New World. After years of lobbying, he was dispatched to South America, where he attempted to carry out his plans, alas with little success. He spent the last years of his life in his native Andalusia,¹² reminiscing about his adventures in another world.

¹²**Andalusia:** southernmost region of Spain.

ANALYZE INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

Annotate: Mark what happens to Cabeza de Vaca in paragraph 16.

Analyze: As a conclusion, what do these examples add to your impression of Cabeza de Vaca?

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer these questions before moving on to the **Analyze the Text** section.

- 1 Why do the Spanish adventurers call the estuary near their campsite the “Bay of Horses”?
 - A There are several herds of horses nearby.
 - B The surrounding land is shaped like a horse’s head.
 - C They are killing, roasting, and eating their horses.
 - D The expedition’s leader raises and sells horses.

- 2 Why is the trip by raft so difficult for the Spaniards?
 - F They face constant storms while traveling the Gulf.
 - G They do not know how to navigate, and grow weaker.
 - H They are frequently attacked by Native Americans.
 - J They have to travel by night for safety.

- 3 What does Cabeza de Vaca do after returning to Spain the first time?
 - A He pushes for better treatment of Native Americans.
 - B He retires and vows never to return to North America again.
 - C He writes a report glorifying his achievements.
 - D He argues that Spain should abandon efforts to colonize the Americas.